



WA cane toad update



Department of Environment and Conservation



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Cane toad sniffer dog assists with South West search

The services of Western Australia's first cane toad detector dog were called upon last month when a contractor discovered a cane toad near Collie, south of Perth.

Nifty, a seven-year-old female Belgian Malinois, who has been working with the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) for the past five years, was flown from Kununurra to the South West town after authorities were notified of a cane toad near the Worsley Alumina refinery.

The animal was captured and killed and transported to the WA Department of Agriculture and Food in Bunbury where it was confirmed to be a cane toad.

DEC Wellington District Manager Drew Griffiths said this was the first time a 'hitchhiker' cane toad had been found near Collie.

"Several traps were set around the Mornington Village accommodation camp where the male cane toad was found and Nifty assisted us with conducting extensive day and night searches of the area, but no others were located," he said.

The department applauded the vigilance of the contractor who alerted authorities to the find but encouraged people not to kill suspected cane toads until they had been positively identified, in case the animal turned out to be a harmless native frog.

DEC Wildlife Officer Allan Madgwick said it was possible that the cane toad had been inadvertently transported by a vehicle that had passed through a toad-infested area either interstate or in northern WA.

"Cane toads are very good at hiding in small spaces so it's important for people to remain vigilant and do thorough checks of their vehicles, caravans and camping equipment if they are heading over from areas where cane toads are known to live," he said.

"We would also advise people to take care when travelling or receiving commercial freight from infested areas."

The discovery and quick response by authorities to the hitchhiker cane toad reflected the continuing work that was being delivered



Cane toad detector dog Nifty and her handler Craig Mills assist in the search for toads.

through the *State Cane Toad Strategy for Western Australia* – not just through front line work in the Kimberley but also through educational activities across the State.

In WA, cane toads are now breeding in and around Kununurra. The invasive species is continuing to advance west of Kununurra with toads expected to be at Wyndham, Doon Doon and Turkey Creek by the end of April.

Efforts to slow the spread of the cane toad are centred around the Kimberley which is the main point of entry for toads entering the State. However, as cane toads continue to advance further into WA, the chances of the invasive pest hitching lifts on vehicles or freight are likely to increase.

DEC continues to work with the Department of Agriculture and Food, community groups and local residents to monitor and manage the movement of cane toads, and to develop strategies to reduce the risk of hitchhikers in WA.

Anyone who suspects they may have found a cane toad should isolate the live animal and report the sighting to the cane toad hotline on 1800 084 881 (free call).

For more information about cane toads visit www.dec.wa.gov.au/canetoads.

Crocodile deaths may be linked to cane toads

DEC is monitoring several water bodies in the east Kimberley following the unexplained deaths of four freshwater crocodiles last month.

It is believed the deaths at Lily Creek Lagoon in Kununurra are likely to be linked to cane toads.

DEC District Wildlife Officer Len Terry said he was first alerted to a sick crocodile in the lagoon by an officer from the Shire of Wyndham–East Kimberley.

“The crocodile was taken to a local vet facility but unfortunately it died soon after,” he said.

“An autopsy revealed what appeared to be cane toad remains inside the animal’s stomach.

“A few days later another three dead crocodiles were found in the same area, but unfortunately we have been unable to do necropsies on the carcasses as they were already badly decomposed.

“At this stage it remains unconfirmed if the crocodiles all died after being poisoned by cane toad toxins, but we believe it was likely.”

Len said so far, it was only smaller crocodiles—those less than a metre and a half in length—which appeared to have been affected.

Meanwhile, DEC and the University of Sydney are continuing to research the impact of cane toads on freshwater crocodiles. Graduate student Ruchira Somaweera, who has been based at Lake Argyle for the past two years, said toad-related crocodile



A freshwater crocodile that died at Lily Creek Lagoon.

deaths often occurred very quickly.

“This is because the toxic molecules are so small that they get passed into the blood stream almost immediately (even through the mouth tissues) and affect the crocodile’s heart,” he said.

Anyone who finds a sick or dead freshwater crocodile in the Kimberley is asked to contact the local DEC office on 9168 4200.

Travellers beware



Photos courtesy Tourism WA

Cane toads make great stowaways and can be easily transported in your goods and luggage. To ensure you don’t accidentally take a cane toad to your next destination, thoroughly check your load when you are packing up to leave an area where the invasive species is present.

Please check your load for cane toads before you depart as the pest can hide in anything that has been on the ground, such as:

- boxes, crates and pallets
- building materials
- personal belongings (such as shoes and bags)

- camping equipment (such as folded tarps, tents, swags and chairs)
- vehicles, trailers and caravans
- boats (under the floor, in bait boxes, tackle boxes, eskies and the engine well)
- pipes (such as rod holders and irrigation piping) and conduit
- potted plants and empty pots.

It is also important to check that you are not carrying a toad when you first arrive from an area where the species is present.

Heavy rains push cane toads further west

Mapping undertaken in the Kimberley by DEC during the 2010–11 wet season revealed that cane toads have continued to colonise new areas.

Heavy rains have helped cane toad numbers to increase in the Kununurra area, while breeding populations are now established well inside the WA border.

DEC State Cane Toad Initiative Program Leader Corrin Everitt said the DEC team and community groups continued to closely monitor the movement of the invasive species over the past few months.

“This is the second wet season since cane toads crossed the WA–NT border in 2009,” she said.

“The season generally occurs between November and April and, as expected, during this period the heavy rains have helped cane toads to travel further west.

“Breeding populations are still concentrated around Kununurra and as the region dries out, surveillance work will give us a better idea of the distance cane toads travelled during the wet as well as their abundance in these areas.

“Cane toads will continue to travel greater distances until the temperature cools and until such time we are expecting to find toads in new areas to the west of Kununurra.”

Corrin said cane toads thrived in wet season conditions and the difficulty of getting people into wet areas usually made it hard to undertake effective management operations throughout that period.

This season, the Kimberley has experienced high rainfall and this seems to have sped up the cane toad advance.

Looking ahead to the dry season, Corrin said the DEC cane toad team would continue to implement measures outlined in the *State Cane Toad Strategy for Western Australia*.

“These include carrying out further biodiversity surveys in the east Kimberley to monitor the impact of cane toads on native wildlife such as crocodiles, snakes and goannas,” she said.

“We will also be continuing with cane toad surveillance activities, community education, scientific research and assisting the University of Sydney’s PhD student Ruchira Somaweera with his ongoing study of the potential impact of cane toads on freshwater crocodiles in Lake Argyle.”

Native frogs versus cane toads – the arrival of an unwanted distant relative

During the wet season frog species become conspicuous around Kununurra as afternoon showers stimulate the males to call for a female mate, leading to amazing choruses of repetitive croaks, woops, clicks and ticks.

When they meet, they deposit and fertilise their eggs, usually in frothy rafts on water or near damp soil.

There are around 30 species of frog that occur in the east Kimberley and it is not uncommon to find numerous species all sharing the same waterhole, but sadly this natural phenomenon is likely to change as cane toads continue to intrude on the State’s north.

It is anticipated that, in time, research will help us better understand the impact of cane toads on native frog species.

Over the past three years, Dr David Pearson from DEC has been conducting regular frog surveys at a variety of water bodies throughout the Kimberley.

He believes that surveying for frogs is not without its limitations, particularly as frogs are recorded on the basis of their calls and by searching for individuals.

“Some burrowing species tend to emerge, call and breed early in the wet season and can therefore be easily missed if surveys are not carried out at the right time of year,” he said.

“Also, the species’ call and strength of their chorus depends on recent rainfall and this wet season there has been above average rain with long dry spells between big downpours.

“Consequently, frog choruses over the past few months have been intermittent, making it difficult to distinguish between the direct impact of cane toads on native frog species and the effects that are being caused by the weather.”

On a positive note, the survey work to date shows that no frog species have disappeared in the area, but time and research will tell if frog numbers will dwindle due to the invasive species.



Native frogs of the Kimberley often mistaken for cane toads.

New development ...

The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), based in Canberra, has registered a new 'cane toad spray' known as Hop Stop, for safe use on individual toads around residential properties. However, the Australian Government statutory authority advises that Hop Stop must not be sprayed into or over water bodies, including dams or fishponds, or directly onto plant foliage.

The APVMA found, on advice from the Australian Government's Environment Department, that the active agent of Hop Stop, 'chloroxylenol', is considered to be highly toxic to freshwater fish and moderately toxic to aquatic invertebrates. The department advised that "it is considered the direct application to toads will cause minimal exposure to non-target aquatic organisms".

The new Hop Stop appears to be particularly designed for residents to use on toads they find in their yards and it may therefore be an alternative to capture for people who are certain they are dealing with a cane toad.

Third round of funding for cane toad group

The fight against cane toads in WA has received a boost after the State Government allocated a further \$341,750 to the Kimberley Toad Busters (KTB).

Environment Minister Bill Marmion said the third round of funding for the community group would allow them to plan and undertake their fieldwork activities for 2011.

"The funding is part of a \$1.2million four-year allocation and to date it has been used to support field operations and to initiate the 'What's in your Backyard' education program," he said.

"It is essential that DEC's cane toad team and community groups continue to work together in order to minimise the impact of cane toads in WA, as this is not an issue that can be effectively managed without community support.

"It also remains critical that we continue with scientific research to investigate potential biological measures to manage cane toad populations in the long term."

In addition to the funding for KTB, the Government has allocated \$800,000 to DEC for research, surveys, management, education and monitoring programs for 2010-11.

Cane toads are one of the most invasive species in the world and the State Government remains committed to the fight against them in cooperation with a range of stakeholders, including community groups, universities, the Australian Government, local shires, Indigenous groups and others.



A juvenile cane toad.

Remember to drop in suspected toads

Kununurra residents have been putting the three cane toad drop-off points to good use to safely discard live cane toads.

Over the past few months, increasing numbers of cane toads have been deposited into the chutes, with more than 100 cane toads transported to the drop-off points for disposal each week.

The number of native frogs being dropped into the traps has also decreased as local residents become familiar with the toad's distinct features.

Cane toads that have been dropped off are humanely euthanased and disposed of at the designated shire landfill pit by an authorised officer, while any native frogs are released into suitable environments throughout the Kimberley.

The drop-off sites, and the pit for disposing of the toads, were established by the State Government to help residents deal with the invasive species.

The community has been very supportive of the drop-off points and DEC congratulates local residents who are doing their bit to reduce the numbers of toads in and around Kununurra.



State Cane Toad Initiative Program Leader Corrin Everitt and Kununurra veterinarian Sarah Brett at a local cane toad disposal site.